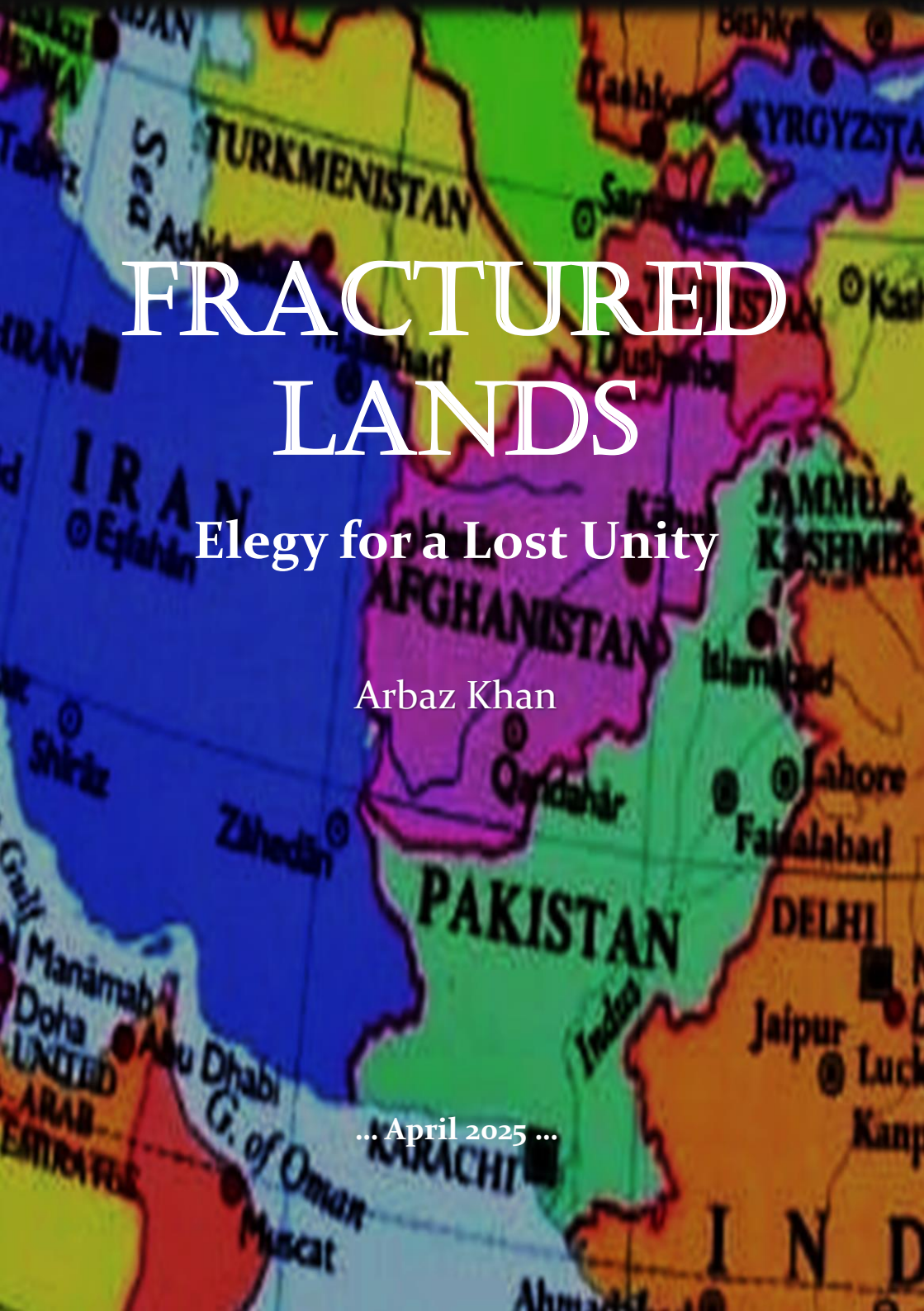




FRACTURED LANDS

Elegy for a Lost Unity

Arbaz Khan

... April 2025 ...

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A Humble Offering:

**To the children of nowhere...
who were born between borders,
who grew up in the shadow of fences,
and who inherited only the echo of a home
they never knew.**

**To the lost generations...
the ones who polished shoes on foreign
streets,
who carried water instead of schoolbooks,
who slept under skies that did not claim
them.**

**To the keepers of the flame...
who whisper Rumi in cellars,
who light Nowruz fires behind closed doors,
who remember what the world has tried to
erase.**

**And to the land itself...
the mountains, the rivers, the dust, the
wind
which remembers, even when we forget,
that we were once whole.**

This work is for you.

May your memory become our map.

Introduction

...The Thread That Remains

This work began as a trilogy of essays, three separate cries from a fractured landscape. But as they were written, something became clear: they were not three stories, but one. One lament, one memory, one pulse beating beneath the skin of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran.

Fractured Lands: Elegy for a Lost Unity is not a history book, though it is steeped in history. It is not a political treatise, though it is shaped by politics. It is, instead, a literary excavation, an attempt to dig through the layers of division and find what was buried but not destroyed... the shared soul of a region torn apart by empires, borders, and wars.

Part I: The Unraveling Bonds traces the deep historical and cultural ties that once made these lands a single civilization. It is the caravan era, the age of poets, the time when identity flowed like the Indus.

Part II: The Fractured Bonds maps the colonial incision, the Durand Line, the Great Game, the Cold War pawns... and how the scissors of geopolitics cut through living tissue.

Part III: The Children of Nowhere brings us to the present, to the human cost of these divisions: the refugees, the deportees, the generations born into statelessness.

Together, these three movements form a symphony of loss, but also of resilience. For even in the brokenness, there is a thread that remains. A verse of Hafez recited in Peshawar, a fire ritual observed in Kabul, a memory of the Koochi whispered in Punjab.

This work is an invitation to remember. To look past the borders and see the bridges. To listen past the divisions and hear the echoes of a unity that was, and perhaps, if we dare, could be again.

Turn the page. The caravan is waiting

Prologue

The Caravan That Never Stopped

Before the maps, there were mountains. Before the borders, there were rivers. Before the nations, there was only the land... and the people who moved across it like breath, like water, like song.

From the Indus to the Euphrates, from the Hindu Kush to the shores of the Persian Gulf, there once flowed a civilization not confined by lines on parchment but bound by threads of language, faith, memory, and trade. Caravans carried more than silk and spice; they carried verses of Rumi, the rhythms of Attan, the wisdom of the Shahnameh, and the promise of Nowruz. Poets spoke in a Persian that curled like incense through the bazaars of Peshawar, Isfahan, and Kabul. Mystics danced in shrines that paid no heed to the flags of kings.

Then came the scalpel. Colonial hands, cold and distant, drew lines across living flesh... the Durand Line, the McMahon Line, borders etched in the ink of empire and the blood of tribes. What was once a tapestry became a patchwork of partitions. What was once a symphony became a cacophony of checkpoints.

This is the story of that fracture. Of how three lands, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran were torn from a shared soul. Of how the Koochi's camel bells fell silent, how the student's path to Mashhad was barred, how the word Afghan became a curse, and how the refugee became a ghost in the land where he was born.

It is a story of lost unity, but also of a stubborn, unkillable memory. For the land remembers what empires forget: that rivers do not stop for walls, that songs do not halt at frontiers, and that the wind carries the same dust over every fence.

We begin where the caravan once did... in the echo.

The Unraveling Bonds of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran

Where caravans once whispered unity, borders now scream division...

The ancient lands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran remain eternally intertwined through history's golden loom, where threads of language and collective memory weave a vibrant tapestry alive with caravan echoes, poets' verses, and the murmurs of fallen empires. From the Achaemenid dawn when Cyrus' imperial strides crossed paths with Kushan monarchs to the Silk Road's thriving lifelines that transported more than mere commodities - the very essence of civilization between Balkh, Isfahan and Taxila - these territories have shared bonds transcending physical terrain. The Persian tongue, vessel of Rumi's divine raptures and Hafez's timeless wisdom, once coursed like lifeblood through royal courts and marketplace alleys, its melodic influence forever shaping Urdu's poetic measures and Pashto's warrior cadences, while today the whirling Attan of Peshawar still answers the daf's primal call from Tehran.

Timeworn sentinels... Herat's towering minarets, Multan's luminous shrines, Shiraz's perfumed gardens, stand vigil over memories of borderless artistry and spirituality, when wandering Sufi mystics chanted truth that melted barriers between dunes and peaks, between Turkic horsemen and Tajik villagers. The legendary heroes of Sistan continue their immortal journey through Baloch oral epics, while Nowruz's enduring spirit momentarily heals modern divisions with its ancient promise of renewal. Yet this profound legacy, more enduring than dynasties and preceding cartography itself, now groans beneath contemporary fractures - tribes divided by artificial boundaries, kinsmen alienated through geopolitical machinations. What persists is an indestructible inheritance of shared ancestry and cultural DNA: not merely nostalgia for bygone unity, but a wordless yearning for that sacred fellowship which history once granted, and which destiny might someday restore.

Here are some evocative Persian lines about the historical ties between the subcontinent; Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran.

These verses capture the spirit of renewal and shared heritage that once bound these regions:

بوی جوی مولیان آید همی

یاد یار مهربان آید همی

The scent of the Muliyan stream returns, and with it,
memories of the beloved.

~Ferdowsi, Shahnameh

Context: This line, attributed to King Jamshid's celebration of Nowruz, symbolizes the return of spring and the nostalgia for unity, a metaphor for the shared cultural roots of the region.

Chaharshanbe Suri Fire Ritual:

سرخی تو از من

زردی من از تو

Take my pallor [sickness]... give me your redness
[health]...

Chanted while jumping over bonfires during
Chaharshanbe Suri.

Context: A Zoroastrian-derived ritual practiced across Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan, reflecting ancient ties to fire as a purifier.

Haft-Seen Table Blessing: Traditional Nowruz greeting:

نوروزتان پیروز

سال نو مبارک

May your Nowruz be victorious... Happy New Year!

Context: The Haft-Seen table, with its seven symbolic items, is a centerpiece of Nowruz in all three regions, emphasizing shared agrarian roots.

Rumi's Ode to Spring:

آمد بهار و سبزه زد هر جانب

گوی که لب ز خنده بگشادست

Spring has come, and greenery sprouts everywhere... as if
the earth has opened its lips in laughter.

Context: Rumi's poetry, born in Balkh (modern Afghanistan), resonates across Persian-speaking lands, embodying the unity of nature and culture.

خانه تکانی کن برای جشن بزرگ

بپوش جامه نو، فصل تازه رسید

Clean your home for the great celebration... wear new clothes, a fresh season has arrived.

~ Behrooz Parhami, contemporary poet

Context: Reflects the universal Nowruz preparation (khane tekani), a custom observed from Tehran to Kabul to Lahore.

The verses quoted above, spanning millennia, highlight how Nowruz rituals and poetry transcended borders, weaving a tapestry of shared identity before colonial divisions. The fire rituals, poetic metaphors of renewal, and communal feasts (like Sabzi Polo in Iran or Samanak in Afghanistan) are living remnants of this unity.

The borders of nations are drawn in blood, but the ties of people are written in the stars... if only their rulers would look up.

In the days gone by, before winter's chill tightened its grip, the Koochi Afghans, commonly known as Pawindas, would emerge from the Hindu Kush like figures stepping out of an ancient caravan painting. Their slow-moving procession of sheep, cattle, and camels traced paths between the Hindu Kush to the upper parts of Sindh... older than nations, their arrival heralded by the rhythmic chime of bells and the murmur of barter in local marketplaces. The women, draped in silks that shimmered like captured sunlight, unrolled bolts of fabric in the alleys of cities and towns across Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly Sarhad)... their voices weaving commerce into the tapestry of daily life. It was a time when borders breathed, when students still set out for the storied madrasas of Mashhad and the libraries of Istanbul, carrying back not just knowledge but the living thread of Persian... a language that once flowed as freely as the Indus through our schools and courts until the mid-1970s.

And who can forget the romance, mystery and the folklore of the Koochi tribes, those wandering spirits who traced their ancient paths between the Afghan heartlands and the Punjab plains?

A centuries-old symphony of movement and tradition, now fractured by the cruel tides of history; the Soviet invasion,

the Afghan Jihad, and its bloody aftermath. Oh, how callously the colonial powers, the tyrants, and aggressors have trampled upon civilizations, leaving in their wake only the ruins of cultures that once thrived.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Wordsworth's lament rings true across time, for what is lost is not merely a way of life but a fragment of humanity's soul.

The land itself seemed to remember older harmonies. The scent of the Muliyan stream, immortalized by Ferdowsi, lingered in the collective memory like a half-forgotten dream of unity. Around Nowruz bonfires, voices rose in the old Zoroastrian chant; Take my pallor, give me your redness... a ritual that leapt across modern frontiers, from Tehran's alleyways to Kabul's foothills. Rumi's verses, born in the Afghan dawn, rolled effortlessly off tongues in Qissa Khwani Bazaar, where the earth's laughter at spring's arrival needed no translation. These were not mere traditions but the quiet, stubborn proof of a shared pulse beneath the skin of three nations.

Then the knives came... The Durand Line, that colonial scalpel, slit through tribal lands, leaving a wound that never healed. The British Empire, in its relentless pursuit of control, carved through the living flesh of Pashtun tribal lands with the Durand Line in 1893. This artificial boundary, never accepted by Afghanistan, became a festering wound. When Pakistan emerged in 1947, it inherited this contested frontier, and Kabul's refusal to recognize it set the stage for decades of mistrust. Afghanistan's early opposition to Pakistan's UN membership, coupled with its support for Pashtun separatists, deepened the rift. Iran, under the Shah, initially stood with Pakistan as a Cold War ally, but the revolution of 1979 reshuffled loyalties, replacing secular alliances with ideological divides.

The Cold War turned this land of rugged mountains and whispering bazaars into a chessboard, its squares marked by the gambits of distant powers. Strategists hunched over maps

in Washington, Moscow, and beyond, molding the mujahideen into pawns and madrasas into factories of fury. The jihad that bled the Soviets dry left behind a wasteland where silk sellers once walked, where the very word Afghan curdled in the mouth, a synonym for suspicion. America and Saudi Arabia funneled arms through Pakistan, while Iran stoked its own factions, deepening the sectarian cracks that would splinter the land.

Then came new betrayals... After 9/11, Pakistan, caught between American demands and its own shadow games, played both sides in Afghanistan, breeding resentment that festered like an old wound. India and the U.S. moved covertly, their proxies groomed by intelligence agencies; CIA, RAW... each move deepening the labyrinth. Now, with the Taliban once more ruling Kabul, old tensions flare anew: Pakistan accuses them of sheltering cross-border militants, while Iran and Pakistan trade barbs over Baloch insurgents, their rivalry sharpened by water disputes and the relentless calculus of power. The region still trembles under the weight of games it never chose to play.

Tyranny and treachery know no bounds... The Afghan jihad brought only death, destruction, and chaos, creating and imposing ethnic and racial rivalries... so much so that lately, the Pakistani government has resorted to the forced deportation of third-generation Afghan refugees, many of whom have known no home but Pakistan... adding another layer to the never-ending post 9/11 tragedy. Everything aligns perfectly with west's scheme to create rifts and deepen fault lines, systematically engineered by foreign powers with the help of a compromised ruling elite over the past decades.

These mass expulsions will deepen Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, further destabilizing a nation already crippled by isolation and economic collapse. The return of hundreds of thousands of refugees, many without homes or livelihoods, risks fueling recruitment for militant groups, exacerbating the very insecurity Pakistan seeks to contain. Afghanistan, unable to absorb this influx, may see increased internal displacement, pushing desperate families toward extremism or crime. The human cost will be immense, and the political fallout, rising anti-Pakistan sentiment among

Afghans, could harden the Taliban's stance, making future cooperation even more unlikely.

Could this spiral into outright war? It seems improbable as both Pakistan and Afghanistan are too fractured, too economically broken, to sustain a full-scale conflict. But the embers of resentment glow hot. Skirmishes along the Durand Line, tit-for-tat airstrikes, and proxy battles through militant groups will continue. Iran, watching from the west, may exploit these divisions, further complicating the region's already tangled web of alliances and enmities.

The story of these lands is one of lost unity, of bonds severed by empires and exploited by outsiders. The people; Pashtun, Baloch, Persian... remember a time when borders were fluid, when caravans moved freely between Herat, Peshawar, and Isfahan. Now, barbed wire and checkpoints mark where kinship once flowed. The future, it seems, will be written not in reconciliation, but in the slow, grinding erosion of what little trust remains.

This is the true cost of empire, not just the drawn borders, but the severed memories. The West's interventions did not merely topple regimes; they erased the quiet understanding that once let a Baloch herder share water with a Sistani farmer, that let a Persian couplet recited in Peshawar meet with nods rather than blank stares. The rivers still run toward the same sea, but the men who drink from them have been taught to call one another strangers.

Now, the Pawindas no longer come. Their youth might have traded their cattle and camels with kalashnikovs and the Pawinda trails lie silent, their winter migrations severed by barbed wire and bureaucracy. The same Pakistani streets that once absorbed their dialects and haggled over their silks now hunt their grandchildren, those born within these borders but orphaned by policy.

The silk has frayed to dust. But walk the Khyber at dawn when the light slants gold, and you'll hear it: the whisper of camels that never left, the echo of a poet who still claims no nationality but earth. The borders were always illusions. The mountains knew this. The rivers knew. Only we, the children of maps, pretended otherwise.

Yet the land keeps its own ledger. The Hindu Kush still catches the same snowmelt that feeds Punjab's fields. The Nowruz fire, though dimmed, still flickers in cellars where old men teach children the forbidden songs. The tragedy is not that these bonds were broken. All empires fall but that we've been made to forget they ever existed.

And history has a way of outlasting empires. Perhaps, someday, the people of these fractured lands will rediscover what was stolen from them; not through the whims of kings or the schemes of foreign powers, but through the stubborn, unyielding memory of shared blood and shared earth. They drew lines on maps, not knowing that rivers do not stop for borders, that songs do not halt at checkpoints, and that the wind carries the same dust over all their fences.

They will tell you this is the way of the world; kingdoms rise, nations fall. But ask the wind that carries the same pollen across their checkpoints, ask the cranes that winter in Sindh but nest in Siberia, whether they've seen a single blade of grass that grows differently for a passport's sake.

For what are borders but illusions? The land remembers what men forget; that before there were nations, there were only people, and before there were wars, there was only home.

~ نیل کے ساحل سے لے کر تابخاک کاشغر

The Fractured Bonds of Persia, Afghanistan, and the Indian Subcontinent

...A lament for the world that might have been.

Long before the jagged lines of colonial borders fractured the land, the regions of Persia, Afghanistan, Kashmir and the Indian subcontinent thrived as a living mosaic of exchange. Caravans laden with saffron and sorrow, scholars bearing Sanskrit scrolls and Persian ghazals, and warriors cloaked in ambition traversed the Silk Road, stitching together a shared destiny.



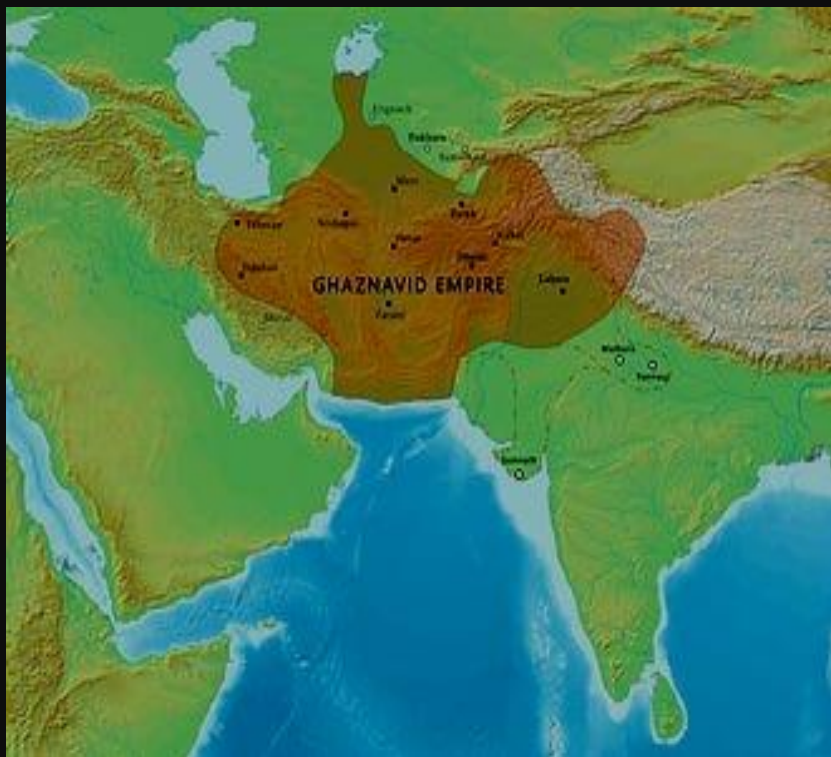
The Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, inspired by Persian statecraft, forged alliances with Seleucus I, binding India to the Hellenistic-Persian world, a union immortalized in the Arthashastra's verses on diplomacy:

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend; the friend of my friend is my ally". This fusion deepened under the Ghaznavids, Turkic dynasties steeped in Persian grandeur, who carved kingdoms from Afghanistan to the valleys of Kashmir, Chitral and Gilgit Baltistan, transforming Lahore, Srinagar, and Delhi into crucibles of Persian poetry and architecture. Amir Khusrow, the Sufi mystic-poet, epitomized this synthesis, blending Indic ragas with Persian meters:

من بت پرست عشقم، بت خانه می سازم
کافر نه دائم من، دین دگر دارم

*I am a pagan in the temple of love,
Don't accuse me of infidelity, my faith is different.*

The Persian Empire's influence seeped into Afghanistan's soil, where Zoroastrian fire temples and Achaemenid administrative systems laid the groundwork for a shared identity that stretched to the highlands of Nooristan and the rugged passes of Chitral. The Royal Road, stretching from Persepolis to the Indus Valley, not only facilitated trade but also the flow of ideas, as Sanskrit medical texts met Avicenna's treatises, and Hindu astrologers found patronage in Persianate courts. Even the Hazaras of Afghanistan, with their Mongol-Persian lineage, became living testaments to the region's layered histories, their features echoing Genghis Khan's conquests and the Khwarazmian Empire's twilight.



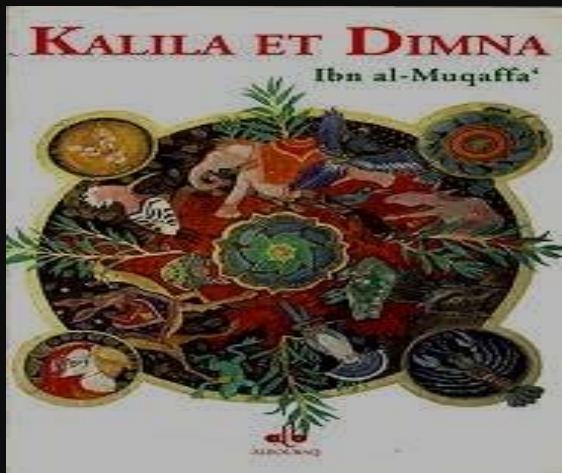


The 11th-century marauder Mahmud of Ghazni, a figure both reviled and romanticized, launched 17 raids into India, but his campaigns also brushed against the fringes of Kashmir and the mountain kingdom of Gilgit.

While his plunder of Somnath's temple in 1025 CE, a "raid for gold," as chroniclers dubbed it, cemented his infamy as the "Idol Breaker," his forays into the northern reaches revealed a land where Buddhist stupas and Hindu shrines stood alongside nascent Islamic influence, a crossroads where cultures clashed and merged. His campaigns were less about religious zeal than geopolitical pragmatism. The Ghaznavid coffers, drained by Central Asian wars, demanded replenishment, and India's temples, repositories of gold and gems, became targets.



Yet these invasions laid bare India's fractured polity: Rajput kings, though valiant, lacked unity, their rivalries exploited by invaders.



The aftermath was a paradox: even as Ghazni's raids sowed distrust, they spurred cultural cross-pollination. Persianate courts in Lahore absorbed Hindu astrologers; Sanskrit texts like the Panchatantra migrated westward, reborn as Kalila wa Dimna in Baghdad.





Afghan tribes, fiercely independent, resisted both Persian shahs and Mughal padishahs: while the mountain lords of Chitral and Gilgit Baltistan played their own games of allegiance and defiance. Ahmad Shah Durrani's 18th-century invasions of India, sacking Delhi, underscored their martial prowess.

These conflicts, however, were often localized, overshadowed by a broader cultural unity that transcended ephemeral borders. The Deccan Sultanates, ruled by Persianized Turks, became crucibles of Indo-Islamic art, where Persian miniatures met Telugu poetry, and Afghan mercenaries served as both warriors and cultural intermediaries.

Amidst the clangor of conquest, softer rhythms endured. Each winter, the Koochi nomads, Pashtun herders from Afghanistan's highlands, descended into Punjab's plains, their camel bells echoing through frost-kissed valleys. Their migrations, immortalized in Punjabi folklore, wove a tapestry of pluralism and diversity:

کوچیاں دے رستے چن دیاں راہاں
تیرے گیت سلیمان دے برف پگھلان دے

O Koochi, your caravan lights the moon's path,
Your songs melt the snow on Suleiman's peaks.



These wanderers bartered wool for wheat, exchanged tales with Sikh farmers, and left behind not just footprints but a shared lexicon: "koocha" (alley) in Urdu, a relic of their passage. Their seasonal odyssey defied later borders, a testament to a time when identity flowed like the Indus, unbound by maps.



In Kutch, the Ahir and Rabari communities embroidered their histories into textiles, their motifs narrating Krishna's legends or the Jats' exodus from Medina. The Meghwar brides

stitched bokani scarves as love letters, their embroidery a silent dialogue between betrothed strangers. These crafts, born of nomadic necessity, became threads in a larger tapestry of transregional kinship, one that colonial scissors would later sever.



The British, wielding the Durand Line like a scalpel in 1893, severed Pashtun tribes and silenced caravan routes. Railways built to extract cotton rerouted centuries-old trade; the Khyber Pass, once an artery of ideas, became a checkpoint. The Raj's "divide and rule" politicized faith: Punjabi Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah lamented:

زمین نوں ٹکڑیاں وچ ونڈ دتا
 ہک نوں ہندو، ہک نوں مسلمان آکھیا
 They've split the earth into fragments,
 Calling one 'Hindu,' another 'Muslim'.

Meanwhile, the Great Game turned Afghanistan into a pawn, its sovereignty bartered in Anglo-Russian treaties. The Koochi, their winter pastures now in Pakistan, became "illegal migrants" in a land their ancestors had traversed for millennia. Persian sovereignty withered under Anglo-Russian intrigues, while India's economy was recalibrated to feed British mills. The Indus Valley's agricultural wealth, once a shared bounty, now enriched colonial coffers, and Afghan nomads found their migratory paths blocked by barbed wire. The British policy of "martial races" fractured communities, privileging Sikhs and Pashtuns as soldiers while

marginalizing others, sowing seeds of ethnic discord that would bloom into Partition's violence.

A Reflection:

Whispers of Unity... these colonial scars. A united region, stretching from the Indus to the Euphrates, from peaks of Nooristan to the valleys of Kashmir, might have harnessed its rivers, mountains, and deserts as connective tissue rather than barriers. The Bhakti-Sufi synthesis could have birthed a spiritual renaissance, while Kabuli Pulao and Hyderabad Biryani, dishes born of Turkic and Indic fusion, symbolized a culinary unity. The moringa tree, carried by migrants from India to Arizona, as recounted in Rekha Warriar's ode to transcontinental kinship, stands as a metaphor: roots adaptable, yet nourishing alien soils.

Instead, the colonial legacy birthed fractured nations. The Durand Line, etched in 1893, became a festering wound, its arbitrary path dividing Pashtun clans and igniting decades of mistrust. The Cold War's chessboard turned mujahideen into pawns, and madrasas into factories of fury.



Today, the Taliban's resurgence and Pakistan's deportation of Afghan refugees deepen the chasm, while Iran and Pakistan spar over Baloch insurgents and water rights. Yet the land keeps its own ledger. The Hindu Kush still catches the same snowmelt that feeds Punjab's fields. The

Nowruz fire, though dimmed, flickers in cellars where old men teach children forbidden songs. Rumi's verses, born in Balkh, still roll off tongues in Peshawar's bazaars, and the Attan's whirl answers the daf's call from Tehran. The tragedy is not that these bonds were broken... all empires fall, but that we've been made to forget they ever existed.



Conclusion:
Had colonial hands not redrawn this land, the region might have emerged as a beacon of pluralism and diversity: a confederation of cultures harnessing its rivers, mountains, and intellectual

wealth. Instead, partitioned nations grapple with inherited strife. Yet the echoes of shared pasts endure: in the moringa's resilient branches, the Koochi's stubborn migrations, and the Sufi's timeless call for *ishq* (love) over empire. The promise sabotaged by ink and arrogance remains, waiting to be reclaimed. As the Afghan poet Rahmat Shah Sayel mourns:

خط کشیدند بر آب
نامش گذاشتند وطن

They drew lines on water,
And called them nations.

Yet in the arc of history, rivers remember their courses, and seeds, like stories, defy fences.

The borders were always illusions. The mountains knew this. The rivers knew. Only we, the children of maps, pretended otherwise.

The Children of Nowhere and the Unforgivable Silence

Behold the piety of the prosperous: A petrol noose for starving underage Pakistan born Afghan Children...

Their crime? A few drops of fuel scraped from a world that denied them bread, school, dignity.

Their sentence? The slow burn of humiliation by those who forgot the caravans that fed their grandfathers.

This is not theft. This is the harvest of borders sown in colonial ink.



Long before the Durand Line carved its jagged scar across Pashtun hearts, before barbed wire choked the Koochi migration routes sung of in Punjabi folklore, the lands from the Hindu Kush to the Indus breathed as one body. Generations moved like rivers; carrying saffron, sorrow, and Sanskrit scrolls, unbound by the fiction of borders.

Today, that body lies dismembered, and in its severed arteries flow the tears of Afghan refugees, hunted like vermin in the very lands where their ancestors traded wool for wheat under frost-kissed moons. This is the story of a betrayal etched not in colonial ink, but in the broken bodies of women and children abandoned by a world that pledged never again.



Forty-five years of exile have birthed a generation of ghosts. They are the children who polished shoes, cleaned and collected garbage, waited on Punjabis and Sindhis, on the streets of Islamabad, Karachi, Gujranwala, Peshawar... almost every urban center of Pakistan, their small hands blackened by leather dye, their bellies hollowed by hunger. Born in Pakistan to parents fleeing Soviet tanks or Taliban whips, they inherited no homeland but the limbo of refugee slums.

Denied birth certificates, schools, clinics; even the right to dream... they became the invisible underclass, toiling for pennies while Pakistan's generals laundered \$200 billion in international aid, earmarked for these children, into Dubai skyscrapers and Swiss vaults.

Then came the knock at midnight...

In October 2023, Pakistan's "Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan" unleashed a three-phase pogrom disguised as policy. Phase one tore 468,000 undocumented souls from their homes; homes bulldozed, shops ransacked, life savings extorted by police who demanded bribes to delay deportation. Abdul Halim watched officers seize his scrap yard and house worth \$7,150, sneering, "This land belongs to Punjabis, not terrorists." Phase two, beginning April 2025, hunted down 800,000 holders of Afghan Citizen Cards; many born on Pakistani soil. Raids shattered doors in Islamabad's alleys; fathers were handcuffed while mothers begged for mercy. Salima Ahmad, eight months pregnant, miscarried after a policeman kicked her abdomen. "They took my husband," she whispered from a Quetta detention cell, "and left me bleeding on the floor with my children screaming."





The Hunting of Women... The cruelty wore a pious mask. Bearded men; self-proclaimed guardians of Islam, led mobs through Lahore's bazaars, smashing Afghan-owned bakeries and fabric stores, chanting "Kafir!" as they looted silks and spices. Police stood idle, nodding as these "devout" Punjabis dragged refugees into streets, shaving the heads of teenage boys for the crime of speaking Pashto.

In Rawalpindi, vigilantes paraded an elderly Afghan widow, accusing her of "blasphemy" for praying at a Sufi shrine. Behind closed doors, worse horrors festered. Lawyers documented 37 cases of rape in custody in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa detention centers alone. Women like Farzana, 24, described being stripped and assaulted by officers who mocked, "Go cry to your Taliban husbands." Pregnant girls as young as 14 were thrown into cells with violent criminals; nursing mothers wept as infants starved without their milk.



The Stealing of Childhood...For children, the nightmare began at dawn. In Karachi's slums, police ripped 50,000 minors from bed mats in April 2025, hurling them onto trucks bound for the Afghan border.

At Torkham crossing, toddlers collapsed in 52°C heat, their lips cracked like dry riverbeds. 545,000 child returnees now wander Afghanistan's dust; 58% of all deportees, their Pakistani birth certificates crumpled in their pockets like worthless currency. Among them is Ahmed, 10, who polished shoes near Islamabad's Faisal Mosque. "They beat me with batons when I cried for my mother," he said, showing scars on his thin arms. "I was born here. Where is 'here' now?" In Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, his sister Mariam, 12, stares at the barred gates of a middle school she may never enter. Pakistan stole her present. The Taliban stole her future.

The world signed the deportation orders.



The Silence of the Guardians...As this machinery of suffering churned, the world's conscience slept. UNHCR issued polite "non-return advisories" while Pakistan ignored them, letting 1.4 million Proof of Registration cards; the last shield of legitimacy, expire on June 30, 2025. Amnesty International released reports but never named the generals orchestrating rape and child imprisonment. The Norwegian Refugee Council noted aid cuts as 23 million Afghans starved.



ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Pakistani police have detained Afghan journalist Freshta Sadeed and transferred her to a detention facility, the Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization said on Tuesday, warning that "returning her to Afghanistan could have devastating consequences."

In a statement, the AJSO, a Germany-based advocacy group for exiled journalists led by Hamid Obaidi, said Sadeed has been in custody since Monday, April 14, and is now at serious risk of deportation to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan — a country she fled due to her reporting on human rights issues.

When Afghan journalist Freshta Sadid; on a Taliban death list, was dragged from her Islamabad apartment despite valid papers, the UN offered "concern" but no rescue. The silence screamed complicity.

Afterward: the land remembers... The Indus still carries snowmelt from the Hindu Kush to Punjab's fields, just as it did when Koochi caravans followed its banks, their camel bells ringing with Bulleh Shah's verses: "They split the earth into fragments, calling one 'Hindu,' another 'Muslim.'"

Today, the fragments are prisons. Children who once danced to Attan drums now shiver in Taliban-run orphanages. Women who embroidered bokani love letters stitch shrouds for babies dead of diarrhea at border camps. And the "pious" mobs who stole their neighbors' bread? They pray in mosques built with refugee aid money.

The tragedy is not that empires fall... it is that we break children to build new ones. As the Afghan poet Rahmat Shah Sayel lamented:

خط کشیدند بر آب
نامش گذاشتند وطن

They drew lines on water, and called them nations.

The rivers always knew: borders dissolve. Suffering does not.

Epilogue ...

The Echo That Remains

They told us the borders were permanent. They told us the divisions were destiny. They told us to forget the caravans, the verses, the shared fires of Nowruz, the kinship that once flowed like the Indus.

But the land does not forget.

The Hindu Kush still sends its snowmelt to Punjab. The same dawn breaks over Shiraz's gardens and Multan's shrines. The same verse of Hafez is whispered in Tehran and hummed in Quissa Khwani Bazaar. The fire of Chaharshanbe Suri still leaps in hidden cellars, in defiant hearts.

We have been taught to call each other strangers. We have been taught to fear the tongue that once united us. We have been taught to see a refugee where once we saw a kinsman, a border where once there was a bridge.

And yet... The mountains remember when they were not boundaries but meeting places. The rivers remember when they were not barriers but guides. The wind still carries the scent of the Muliyan stream... and with it, the memory of the beloved.

This book is not a lament for what was lost. It is a testament to what remains: the unbroken pulse beneath the skin of three nations. The invisible thread that still connects a Baloch herder to a Sistani farmer, a Pashtun poet to a Persian mystic, a Punjabi farmer to the Koochi who once shared his wheat.

Empires drew their lines. Kings made their claims. But the land keeps its own ledger. And in its quiet, patient way, it writes a different story... one of return, of renewal, of rivers finding their way back to the sea.

Perhaps one day, we will listen. Perhaps one day, we will look up from our maps and see what has always been there: Not fractured lands, but a living, breathing whole.... waiting to be remembered.

The End

Fractured Lands: Elegy for a Lost Unity

A compiled work of memory and witness